Tricycle Talks
Episode #72 with Jay Garfield
"Learning to Live without a Self with Jay Garfield"
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James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. We often hear about the Buddhist teaching of no-self. But what does it actually mean to live without a self? In his new book, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live Without a Self*, scholar Jay Garfield argues that shedding the illusion of the self can actually make you a better person. Drawing from Buddhism, Western philosophy, and cognitive neuroscience, Garfield unpacks how the illusion of self is not only just that—an illusion—but also morally dangerous. Once we let go of this illusion, he argues, we can lead healthier and more ethically skillful lives.

In today's episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Garfield to talk about the ethical dangers of the self illusion, the freedom that can come from moments of selflessness, and how we can let go of our selves to reclaim our humanity.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Jay Garfield, a scholar of Buddhist philosophy and professor at Smith College. Hi, Jay, it's great to be with you.

Jay Garfield: Great to be here. Thank you for having me.

James Shaheen: We're here to talk about your new book, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self*. Can you tell us a little bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Jay Garfield: Well, the book is kind of fun. As you probably know, most of the books that I write are fairly academic and aimed at academic audiences. But Princeton University Press approached me wanting a book aimed at a more general audience on the topic of selflessness,

and my first thought was, "That should be fun, and that should be really easy. After all, I've been thinking about this topic for a long time." So I thought it would be kind of fun and easy. It turned out to be really hard. And the reason it turned out to be really hard is because of the constraints on the book. It's got to be really accessible to people who have not been studying philosophy, who have not been studying Buddhism. It's got to be reasonably compact because they're trying to sell it to a general audience, of course. Nobody wants to carry a brick around. And it also has to be accurate and precise because I'm not willing to dumb the stuff down for people. And I also know that my colleagues are going to be reading it, so I've got some kind of an obligation to get it right. And it turns out that trying to get it right, get it short, and get it clear and accessible is really hard to do all at the same time. So I'm hoping that it works. But the idea is this. A central doctrine of Buddhist philosophy is that we don't have selves, that we are selfless persons. That doesn't mean that we don't exist; it means that we exist in another way. We don't exist substantially or intrinsically or independently, but our existence, like the existence of everything else, is interdependent, conventional, constantly changing. And as I put it, we're more like roles than we are like actors. And to try to capture that for people is the task of the book, and I hope that it succeeds.

James Shaheen: I think you very much succeeded. It's 170 pages, it's very readable, and it is for a general audience. I really think you did an amazing job with that. One of the things that I was interested in talking to you about is this notion that Evan Thompson presented me with when I interviewed him. He challenged Buddhists not to be complacent with this notion of non-self or no-self, and I had to ask myself, "Well, then why do I believe that? Why do I subscribe to that belief?" I couldn't just rest easy in that. I feel like it was a challenge he presented us with, you took up that challenge, and did a really incredible job of explaining, for me anyway, why I can feel a little bit more comfortable with this belief. At the start of the book, you share the Buddhist philosopher Candrakirti's analogy of the snake in the elephant. Can you walk us through that analogy and how it guides your work in this book?

Jay Garfield: Sure. But first, let me say I'm glad you mentioned Evan because it was Evan's book, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, that prompted Princeton University Press to ask me to write this book, hoping that I would take up that challenge, and Evan is certainly my interlocutor here in a lot of ways. I should emphasize for listeners, Evan and I have been very close friends for a very long time, and we agree about a lot of things, we disagree about a lot of things, but our disagreements and our agreements are always among friends. So if sometimes I take Evan's position on, it's with deep respect and affection for Evan. Our best friends are the people with whom we disagree because they force us to sharpen our ideas and to change our ideas when we're wrong. But coming back to your question about Candrakirti, there really are two major heroes in this book. One is David Hume from the West, and one is Candrakirti from India, philosophers around whom I've orbited for a very long time. So Candrakirti, in his text called *Introduction to the Middle Way*, Sanskrit title *Madhyamaka Avatara*, tells this great story about a guy who is really worried that there's a snake that's taken up residence in the wall of his house. If you live in India, this is the kind of thing that can be dangerous because typically the snakes who take up residence or kraits or cobras or things like that, and if you disturb them, they bite you and you die. So this guy is afraid there's a snake in the wall of his house, and so he searches the house and says, "There are no elephants here," and so he relaxes. Candrakirti comments that we would think somebody like that was really stupid, wouldn't we? And so you kind of scratch your head when you look at this. But when you look at the metaphor, it actually makes a great deal of sense. The snake in the wall of the house is our innate sense of a self, that is, our atavistic feeling that when I ask who I am, there's a core me, a Jay, who's different from my body, different from my mind, the thing that owns my body and mind and that controls things and that remains constant through my whole life. It's the thing that was there when I was born and will be there when I die, and if I believe in rebirth, it's the thing that I think will continue, and so forth. Or if I believe in heaven, and hell, it's the thing that will suffer eternal damnation or go to its eternal reward. But anyway, the serpent is that self. The elephant is all of the other things that we might

find that we could refute and convince ourselves that we're not selves. So for instance, you might think, "Gee, I'm really identical to my body; no, I'm not identical to my body, so I've actually taken care of the problem of a self." Or you might think, "I'm really my mind," and you go and refute the idea that I'm identical with my mind and you say, "Wow, I've taken care of the problem of the self." And Candrakirti's point is that we very often fail to identify the target of our analysis, and so we end up refuting something else and think that we've taken care of the job. Another way to put this is we sometimes, after maybe refuting the idea of a self, then go ahead to identify ourselves with something else, with our body or with our mind or with our history or with a narrative or something like that, and then try to reconstruct a kind of individual identity. Candrakirti's admonition is to pay attention to that object of negation. Pay attention to what you're trying to refute, refute it, and don't replace it with something else. So in this book, I really try to draw the reader's attention to what we innately and instinctively take ourselves to be and then to reconstruct what we actually are in a way that allows us to refute that innate misconception without falling into nihilism and without failing to construct any kind of positive account of our own identity as persons.

James Shaheen: So I can read your book and buy your arguments and say, yes, I can argue with this, this makes sense. But you refer to an innate, instinctive sense of our selves, so I still fall prey to this delusion. Deep down, many of us are often very convinced that we have a self despite all logical argument.

Jay Garfield: Yes, there is always a danger that when we do philosophy, we're actually succeeding in what a psychoanalyst friend of mine calls adding insight to injury. All we're doing is convincing ourselves intellectually of something we know we ought to believe but in a way that doesn't really have much impact on our lives. Of course, that's one of the reasons that in the Buddhist tradition, we usually think of analysis or contemplation as a kind of midpoint between study, or hearing, as it's sometimes referred, and meditative practice. The goal of meditative

practice and the role of meditative practice, then, is to internalize what we've learned through analysis, to make it part of the way that we take up with the world. Now, of course, not everybody who reads this book will be interested in the meditative practice, and not everybody who reads this book will be interested in self-transformation. And that's fine. Not everybody has to have that as their project. But if your project is to come to understand yourself and to reorient your life, the book at least gives you the analytic material that you can take into meditative practice. But the other thing that I note in the book that I hope is helpful to people is that even though we do have a kind of innate atavistic tendency to reify ourselves, we don't do that all the time. I think we do it whenever we're called upon to think about who we are, and we kind of fall into that trap, unless we're highly advanced practitioners, for whom I've got tremendous respect and admiration. But that isn't me. I know I fall into that trap. I fall into it constantly. But I do think there are a lot of times when we do succeed in forgetting ourselves, maybe in the contemplation of beautiful art, maybe in listening to music, maybe in a deep and meaningful exchange with a close friend, maybe playing a sport, or engaged in practicing something in which we're highly skilled, where our sense of self and of subject-object duality just vanishes and we suddenly realize, at a certain point, that we haven't been thematizing ourselves for a very long time. And of course, the moment we realize that, we've rethematized it. But at least in retrospect, we recognize that we do have these moments of nonegocentric consciousness. So one way to think about the kind of transformation that we could be aiming at is to extend that amount of time in which we have that kind of egoless consciousness and to live our lives more in a flow state than in this kind of state of reified subject-object duality that I think really does get in our way.

James Shaheen: Right, you talk about the flow state. I wonder in that state what happens to our sense of agency and what happens to our notion of space and time? Literature is full of these moments, Levin scything the wheat in *Anna Karenina*, for instance, just one example. All of us have experienced, whether in sport or in writing or in doing anything that we do when we do it

well, we've all experienced that flow state, I think. And we, of course, want to cultivate and even lengthen those moments, and as you say, we come back to ourselves, and all of a sudden, you have a consideration, "Gee, I'm really great," and we lose it. But we do feel free in that state, but that freedom is a very different kind of freedom than we normally think about. Can you say something about that?

Jay Garfield: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's exactly the right question to ask because, oftentimes—and I think this isn't exclusive to the Western tradition, in any sense, this is something that I think people all over the world do—we tend to run together a particular kind of freedom and agency. And so it's easy to think that to genuinely be an agent, we have to have some kind of transcendent freedom, where our actions or our intentions are exempt from the general causal nexus and they're just spontaneous. We just do things because we want to rather than because we've been caused to. We often distinguish mere movement or behavior from action on the grounds that the ladder is undertaken freely and the former is completely determined by causes and conditions. And if you think of agency like that, then agency has to be a myth because we're actually physical organisms in a physical world and everything that we do is caused, and we want it to be like that. That is, you want your actions to be caused by your intentions. Otherwise, they'd be weird and random or inserted or caused by somebody else. That wouldn't be freedom. You want your intentions to be caused by your beliefs and your values. Otherwise, it would be some alien intention being inserted into your mind. We want our beliefs to be caused by our perceptions of what other people have told us, not just to arise randomly. So determinism isn't something we should fear. It's what Buddhists call dependent origination, what Western folks call determinism, and it just means that we are part of a network of causes and conditions. That doesn't mean that we're not also agents, though, because some of our actions are caused by our intentions. And those are actions with which we identify, that we recognize as our own, that are part of the narrative or the script that determines our lives. I think that in a flow state, that kind of agency is amply present, just as it is in all of our lives. It's just that it's not

accompanied by this sense that I'm a free agent outside of the causal nexus. It just involves a smooth transition from intentions to actions. So if we imagine a skilled athlete, like, say, a soccer player on a field, receiving a pass, dodging a defender, passing the ball on to the next player, that person is an agent in all of those things. It's not something it's just happening to them. They're doing it, and they're exerting themselves in order to do it. But the person isn't thinking to herself, "Oh, here I am, the recipient of the pass. Here I am, I'd better dodge this defender. Here I am, I must freely pass this ball to another person." That's not there. Lots of agency, but no thematization of the self and freedom. I think we need to free ourselves from the illusion of transcendental freedom in order to appreciate the kind of freedom that we do have, namely, the ability, very often, to act in accordance with our intentions and our values.

James Shaheen: So in other words, the flow state is then broken. When we come back to this notion of self, "I am doing this," we break that state and we become very awkward.

Jay Garfield: And less skilled and less happy, less aware of actually who and what we are.

James Shaheen: You said something about how most of us are experts at walking. We just walk. But I thought of this character from an Italian novel during the early days of psychoanalysis, Confessions of Zeno. He begins to consider what it means to walk. He thinks of all the muscles that are triggered, and he starts to think of the number of bones in his feet, and he's the classic, early, neurotic. He begins walking with a limp because he's overwhelmed by the complexity of the action that his self enters into. So it's very much a description of what you're talking about, I think.

Jay Garfield: The need to have that kind of deliberate thematized attention to ourselves and to action is something that is important when we're learning skills. But we don't do that because

it's the end state; we do that in order to carefully attend to who we are and what we're doing. But expert performance requires that we shed that. And I think that's really important.

James Shaheen: So in other words, the subject-object duality, this notion of a self, can actually be a tool for the amateur who's learning, is that right as a sort of heuristic? Or is that wrong?

Jay Garfield: I think that's so. I mean, it doesn't require reifying the self, but it does really require an explicit and dualistic kind of framework. So there's a whole lot of very cool research in sports psychology about the difference between that attitude and flow state. It turns out that if you're a novice at a particular task, and this, by the way, has been replicated not just for golf, but for surgery. When you're first learning a skill, it's really important to have self-directed attention. How am I breathing? How am I standing? Where are my hands? What am I doing? Where is my attention? And if you inhibit that self-attention by using a distractor, like, for instance, asking people to listen to music, novice performance degrades very rapidly. On the other hand, if you ask experts to engage in that same kind of attention—where are my hands, how am I breathing, how am I standing, what am I doing—their expert performance degrades dramatically. And the way to recover it is to distract them from that, to listen to some music or something like that. The fact is that we're at our best when we're experts. That's almost tautological. And so we find ourselves at our best when we drop that thematization of ourselves and that subject-object duality. That doesn't mean we don't need it sometimes in order to get there. After all, if we start losing our ability to interact with others spontaneously and effectively, we may go into therapy, and what does that therapist do? She directs our attention to who we are, how we're feeling, what we're thinking, and takes us back to a novice state. We don't want to then go back into the world and constantly be as self-conscious as we would be in psychotherapy. We want to be able to shed that and to act spontaneously again, because when we're spontaneous, we are at our best.

James Shaheen: So I want to get back to self as illusion again. It's not just semantics—you write that it obscures our own identities from us and "generates a perverse moral vision that engenders an instinctive attitude of self-interest and egoism that none of us can rationally endorse and from which we would happily free ourselves." So you can come back to this later, but can you share briefly about the ethical consequences of a belief in self?

Jay Garfield: Yeah, I think this is really where the rubber hits the road because it's one thing to think abstractly about personal identity, to think about the metaphysics of bodies and minds and persons and so forth. But it's quite another to think about who we are and how we ought to think about our interactions with other people, in particular, in ethically charged situations. And actually, most of our lives are ethically charged in one way or another. We can put the point this way. For anybody who has studied economics, especially microeconomics, or game theory, we get this definition of rationality as the disinterested pursuit of our own immediate self-interest. So I'm rational if I adopt a strategy that makes sure that I've got more chips at the end of the game than anybody else. I'm rational if I make sure that I maximize what I want and just ignore what other people want. And I'm irrational if I undertake behavior that decreases my own utility or that takes other people's utility into consideration where that utility doesn't affect my own. Now, that's a recipe for a very narrow kind of egoism, and it's a recipe for the idea that even though maybe it might be nice and a great option to care about other people, the first thing I've got to do is to care about myself. And so if somebody asks me, "Gee, why did you do that?" Leave aside what it is, and I just answer "Well, because it made me happy, or because I want to." That's taken as a perfectly good explanation, a perfectly reasonable explanation. Another side of that, by the way, is that in a lot of cultures, like our own culture, we hear language like, "Children need to learn to stand on their own two feet, to be independent, to think for themselves." And I scratch my head when I hear that. And I wonder, does that mean we have to grow our own food and to make the dirt in which the food grows and to cause the rain that moistens the crops as well? I mean, what is it to stand on our own two feet? Everything we do,

we do because we rely on our interactions with others and what others have done for us. And anything that could possibly increase our own happiness is something that should also be increasing the happiness of others, or we fail to recognize our profound interdependence. So I think that what happens is this. We focus on the self, and that self is this independent, substantial thing different from everything else, free from causality and all that stuff, and that allows us permission to take our own narrow self-interest as motivating. And that's permission to ignore the demands of morality. I think that's an extraordinarily pernicious thing. And I do think that it has visible and obvious consequences in our culture. It generates a kind of competitiveness, a view of life as a kind of zero-sum game, you die with the most toys, you win, and it also justifies some of the worst aspects of consumer capitalism, the idea that if we generate a system of production and organization that enables each of us to just rationally pursue our own immediate self-interest, life will be good. And we buy into that and then discover gigantic income inequalities, oppression, racism, alienated labor, all that stuff. And I think a lot of that really is honestly traceable to the self illusion and to the way that that self illusion is not only accepted but endorsed and encouraged.

James Shaheen: Well, I think the notion of rational self-interest is sort of fundamental to the ideology that underlies and drives our economy. So it would, in fact, be self that underlies it, or the belief in self. Is that right?

Jay Garfield: Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. I think it's absolutely right.

James Shaheen: You explore Buddhist and Western philosophical arguments against the existence of self, so I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about Buddhist arguments for why we have no self. Could you identify, for instance, the four key conceptual components of the idea of self, priority, unity, subject-object duality, and agency, for instance, just to give us a sense of what this idea of self is and what a few arguments against it might be?

Jay Garfield: When we talk about priority, we've got this idea that the self kind of comes before the body in the mind. It's the foundation, it's the thing that has a body in mind, but it's different from that. And it's easy to convince yourself that that's the kind of thing that you are, that my body might change, my mind might change, but the self that underlies them is the same. The idea of unity is that with all of the plurality and all of the difference between who I am now and who I once was and who I will be, how I'm feeling today, how I felt yesterday, how I might feel tomorrow, that plurality has to be unified in experience and action into one center of subjectivity and agency. The idea of agency is the idea that it's that self that freely performs actions in virtue of its kind of transcendent exemption from the world of causal interaction. And the idea of subject-object duality is the idea that the experience we have is primordially structured, just naturally structured, in the way that there are subjects and then a world of which we are subjects. The great metaphor for that is the metaphor that the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein uses in his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* when he says when we think about the self, it's like the relation between the eye and the visual field, that the visual field discloses that there's an eye, but the eye isn't in the visual field, just as the world that we experience discloses the fact that there's a self standing behind it, even though that self isn't anything in the world. I think those are the real components of the self, and when we spell them out that way, they're all just wonderfully familiar. I think of myself as experiencing the world, not as a thing embedded in it. I think of myself as somebody who acts on the world, not somebody upon whom the world acts. I think of myself not as a committee but as a single thing. And I think of myself not as one of the many phenomena but as something ontologically and axiologically prior to all of those. I think that that really captures the serpent that's in the wall. When Buddhists argue against the existence of such a thing, they argue that if we just look analytically into what we are, the analogy that Candrakirti uses that he draws from the questions of King Milinda, a great paracanonical story, is the analogy of a chariot, though I always prefer to think of it as a garden cart because we've all been frustrated by assembling garden carts. We know that when you've got a heap of garden cart

parts, you don't have a garden cart. We also know that when you assemble them, you've got one. But if you take a look at it, it's not identical to those parts, or you would have had it even when the box was delivered. It's not identical to those parts even so arranged because if there's a defective wheel and you send it back and get a new one, you still got the same garden cart but just another wheel. And you also know that it's not something different from the cart because if you take all the parts away and say, "I don't want the parts, I just want the cart," there's nothing left at all. And so as Candrakirti puts it, we're neither identical to our components, nor are we different from them. We're not something that stands by and owns them, and we're not something that you somehow find in them. Candrakirti points out we're not even simply supervenient on those parts. Rather, we're supervenient on a whole network of social and biological relations that determine and constantly affect those parts so that our identity as persons is not a metaphysical identity but a conventional, or as I like to think of it, a hermeneutical and interpretative identity that gives us the people, the persons who we are, but we can quite tidily think of ourselves as persons without thinking about that snake in the walls as the owner of that person.

James Shaheen: So what if somebody says to you, "Oh, I'm a person, then. Isn't that just a substitute for a self?" But you make it very clear that the distinction is an important one. Can you say something about that?

Jay Garfield: Sure. A person is in some sense a substitute for the self. That is, it's a more realistic way of thinking about our identity than the self is. So I'm urging people through reading this book to come to reject the notion that their identity is that of a self and to accept that it's the identity of a person. The big differences are that those crucial components of the self that you mentioned a moment ago, unity, agency, priority, subject-object duality, none of those are present in a person. Persons are constantly evolving, constantly open sequences of psychophysical processes, interpreted as real through the social, political, and biological conventions and ways

of behavior that we have. The analogy that I run throughout the book is that if we think about an actor playing a role, persons are more like roles than they are like actors. That doesn't make them unreal. Hamlet is a real role. But Hamlet can be played by Sir Laurence Olivier or by Benedict Cumberbatch, and we don't suddenly have two different Hamlets except in some metaphorical sense. We've got the same role, and it's a role that's constituted by a whole set of conventions, conventions of the theater, by scripts that have been written, by ways Hamlet has been played in the past, and now by Tom Stoppard through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. An actor is simply somebody who's stepping in and playing that role for a while. But when we think about who we are, we're roles. Our bodies are part of the actor that plays that role. Our minds might be part of the actor that plays that role. But as persons, we're governed by complicated sets of conventions and interpretative practices. We only exist because those practices exist. As biological members of Homo sapiens, we're responsible to genetics. As persons, we're responsible to culture and to others. And in either case, we are constantly changing, open-ended phenomena, not isolated, self-existent phenomena. Moreover, as persons we are part of a spatial, temporal, and social complex, not standing outside of it in a dualistic relation. As persons, we're interdependent with one another, and so our domain of concern includes all other persons, just as if you're a character in a play, your existence and your reality depends upon all of the other characters in the play. We couldn't have Hamlet as a one-character event. You need Ophelia and Polonius and all of those other guys to make it go.

James Shaheen: So how do we affirm the reality of the person while denying the reality of the self?

Jay Garfield: Well, I think just by being very clear-eyed. When we deny the reality of the self, all we deny is the existence of that unitary, subjective, free, independent core that is somehow prior to and independent of all of the other stuff that we do and all of the causal relations and social relations into which we enter. We can deny that without denying that as persons we're

perfectly real. Think about other kinds of conventional composites. Suppose you think about a college. So I teach at a college, and if my mom comes to visit me and she says she wants to see Smith College, I could take her on the campus, and I'd say, "Here's the library. Here's the administration building. Here's some student houses. Here's the building where my office is. Here's the building where I teach my classes. Here are the lawns." And she says to me, "No, no, no, I didn't want to see buildings. I didn't want to see libraries. I didn't want to see lawns. I wanted to see the college." And I say, "Well, over there, there's the president of the college." "I don't want to see the president, I want to see the college." At some point, I'm going to look at her and say, "What are you actually looking for?" And she says, "I don't want the buildings, I don't want the lawn, I don't want the admissions procedures, I don't want the catalog, and I don't want the courses. I want to see the thing that has all of those." At that point, I'm going to say to her there is no such thing. And if you think there is such a thing, you have a profound misunderstanding of what a college is. We have a college when we have this network of students and teachers and administrators and cooks and ground keepers and administrative assistants and librarians and books and buildings and computers and video projectors and all of that stuff, plus a whole bunch of social conventions for recognizing that as a legal entity and processes for applying to it and recognizing the credentials that it delivers. And all of that stuff together constitutes a college. But it doesn't constitute some core thing that's got those. Now, I haven't convinced my mom that I don't teach at a college. I've kept the college intact. What I have done, I hope, is disabused her of the illusion that there's some little pearl someplace, some glowing object that we can point to and say that thing, that's the college that has all of these buildings, that teaches all of these courses, that hires all of these professors, and so forth. Now, I think it's just like that with the person and the self. We can convince ourselves through clear-eyed reasoning that there's nothing in us that answers to the mythos of the self. But seeing that there's nothing like that doesn't mean that we cease to exist as persons.

James Shaheen: Just a digression for a moment. You use the word conventional a lot. How are you using that word? As opposed to what?

Jay Garfield: As opposed to substantial, as opposed to existing primordially in the absence of any human convention. When I use the word "conventional," I am quite self-consciously using it in a way that Candrakirti uses it but also as David Hume uses the word custom. That is, it reflects the way that we behave collectively, the agreements that we make, whether tacit or explicit. So driving on the right side of the road in the US and on the left side of the road in the UK, those are each conventions. The Geneva Conventions are conventions. It also means what we do when we come together, like the Democratic National Convention. But convention also means ordinary or everyday, the way we behave ordinarily. So my custom of taking a walk with my dogs first thing in the morning, we might say, is one of the customs or conventions in which I participate. So I think of conventions as comprising habits, ordinary, everyday ways of being, ways of thinking, ways of talking, explicit agreements that we make, tacit agreements that we make. And part of the claim of this book is that when we think about what constitutes our own identity, we see that that identity is constituted by a very vast and complex and often invisible web of conventions that brings us into existence, not some kind of prior metaphysical fact.

James Shaheen: So what we're getting at in so many ways is that we exist only in relationship to each other and everything around us. We're embedded.

Jay Garfield: Precisely.

James Shaheen: You also turn to Dogen's *Genjokoan*, and I just want to quote that. "To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things. When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind, as well as the bodies and minds of others, drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no trace continues endlessly." So can you

walk us through this passage and the connection between absence of self and engagement with the world?

Jay Garfield: Sure, that's what Dogen is talking about there, and that's one of my favorite passages in all of Buddhist philosophy. I find myself coming back to it again and again. So when we talk about the self dropping away and being actualized by the myriad things, that's the difference between thinking that our identity consists in some independent core fact about us that we can specify without thinking about anybody else or any other kinds of relations, that there's this kind of independent entity there. But to be actualized by the myriad things is for our identity as persons to emerge in our interaction with other objects in the world that we inhabit, with other persons who coexist with us in the world we inhabit, with other kinds of sentient beings, with social practices, with our past, with our future, and so forth. Those are the myriad things. And we find ourselves actualized as persons by the myriad things precisely because we aren't independent selves but are independent phenomena. When that happens, when Dogen talks about body and mind dropping away, what he means is that we no longer think of body and mind as the possessions of selves. Rather, the way that we think about who we are is as interdependent beings. We don't identify ourselves narrowly in our body, narrowly in the contents of our mind, but rather, as the complex, ever evolving set of psychophysical processes in constant open interaction with the world, again, actualized by the myriad things. When he says that, at that point, no trace of realization remains, there's not an entity that remains behind. Rather, we're recognizing the fact that we exist only as nodes in this interdependent web. And it's that recognition of our interdependent nature that goes on and on through causal processes.

James Shaheen: I know a lot of people respond to these arguments by saying that they lack agency or are deterministic, and they get a sort of fatalistic sense. But in fact, the way it's described is very liberating. You mean I don't have to do all that work to be a self anymore? It is liberating, and it is a different kind of freedom than what we ordinarily associated with freedom.

Sometimes we get so reductive, we say, I'm free to choose what I want in the supermarket. But this sort of freedom is the freedom not to have to be a self or sustain that self. So a lot of energy that goes into that.

Jay Garfield: Yeah, we could think of it as the Kris Kristofferson/Janis Joplin conception of freedom. Another word for nothing left to lose. We don't have a self that we have to protect. We don't have a self that we have to be afraid of losing. And that is a freedom from illusion, as opposed to a freedom to do some particular thing. And I think that kind of freedom from is pretty central to a lot of Buddhist thought.

James Shaheen: Yeah, there's no one special to be, and the flow state you describe as a perfect example of that freedom. I think that that's very appealing. The question of self is a deeply ethical one, and you write that the illusion of self is also bound up with moral egoism. Can you share more about how moral egoism structures our political and economic landscape?

Jay Garfield: Moral egoism is simply the idea that my own narrow self interest is at least prima facie motivating and justifying so that if I do something, anything, if I explain why I did it and I say, "Because it made me happy to do it," or "Because I wanted it," that that by itself constitutes at least a basic even if defeasible justification for the action, and we might say there are other strictures that undermine that justification. So for instance, if it's, you know, torturing kittens, somebody might say, well, it might make you happy. But look what it's done to the poor kitten. But notice that "It's making me happy" was on the positive side of the ledger—it was just overridden by what was on the negative side of the ledger. And the idea that the positive side of the ledger is my own narrow self-interest is morally egoism. The moment we allow a self into the picture, then moral egoism is just hiding in the closet because the moment I've got a self and everything else is an object for that self, then there's a fundamental ontological divide, a divide in the nature of being between me and everything else. Everything else is my object. I'm the

subject. Everything else is the patient of my actions. I'm the agent of those actions. And so there's something very special about me, and that becomes the kind of unspoken justification for the morally egoistic attitude. But once you've got the morally egoistic attitude, then the interests of others have to be defended as somehow overriding my own interests, and that's very hard to do. I mean, I can always find reasons that my interests are actually more important to me at least. And so I might say something like, "Oh, yeah, she can pursue her own interests, but I don't need to worry about them. I'll pursue mine. Each to their own. Every person for themselves." And then it's a short step from there to a kind of competitive social arrangement, where we say, "OK, life is basically a race, the person who's fastest wins, and my goal is to stay in my lane and get to the finish line before everybody else," to think that life is basically competitive. So if I'm able to achieve a distribution of goods that gets them all in my pocket and leaves everybody else impoverished, that's fine. If they had competed harder, they would have got it, and they didn't, so it's good that I won that way. And when we do that, that breeds not just a disinterest in the welfare of others, but a kind of disregarding of the welfare of others. We hope that that's remediated by a kind of invisible hand that's going to result in all of this selfish competitive behavior somehow generating equitable prosperity and happiness and that we can each take enough joy in the fact that other people have beaten us, that we'll be happy. But it doesn't. It simply leads to self-alienation, to alienation from others, to a deeply misleading view of that in which happiness consists. a reduction of happiness to possession or pleasure. That's what Marx called commodity fetishism, when we think that somehow just having good makes us happy. It leads to our alienation of our own being in the pursuit of what looks like success. None of that's good. None of that's good. And all of that, I think, is inevitably grounded in the self illusion. So I actually hope that if we can extirpate the self illusion, we can take some strides in the direction of social justice. We can take some strides in the direction of actually caring for others, of cultivating friendliness, of greater impartiality, of being able to take joy in the success of others and not only in our own vanquishing of them, and I think that generates a healthier society and healthier individuals.

James Shaheen: Well, you've just described the *brahma-viharas*, which I was going to mention next, as really an antidote to this clinging attachment to a belief in self. Do you want to say something about the active cultivation of this more realistic understanding of who we are as persons?

Jay Garfield: Yes, because I use the brahma-viharas explicitly to do this. So for people who aren't familiar with those, brahma-viharas, or divine states, are *maitri*, or friendliness; *karuna*, or care, often translated as compassion, but I prefer care for that; *upeksha*, or impartiality and equanimity; and *mudita*, the ability to take joy in the success and the accomplishments of others. I think that when we take those four together, they constitute a vision of the moral landscape that is antithetical to that we get in moral egoism. What moral egoism encourages us to do is to see the moral landscape as characterized by a set of polar coordinates where we are at the center and what we want is dispositive, where those who are very close to us might give us enough happiness when they do well that we should care about them as well, maybe my spouse and my dog and my kids, and then maybe those a little further out, we care about a little bit less, and those who are far enough out, we don't care about at all. But it gives us a sense of the moral landscape that is structured by my own identity and the relation of everybody else to me. That's what gets called in Buddhist philosophy the twofold self grasping, grasping of "I" and "mine." That is, I grasp myself as a self, and I see the existence and the importance of everything else in terms of its relationship to me. Is that my friend or my enemy, close to me over here or over there, useful to me or unimportant to me, and so forth. Now, if you think for a moment, even just a moment, that is a terrible distortion of what the moral landscape looks like. We can't each be the center of the moral universe. And if I'm at the center, you're at the periphery. And the idea that we simply live these lives in disconnected moral universes, each of them centered on another self, makes the possibility of community and the sense of morality completely incomprehensible. Instead, we should be thinking of the moral universe as a kind of uniform space, a space in which

we locate a position that is no different in kind and no more or less special than any other position that could be occupied in that landscape. And that's what we get when we think in terms of upeksha, or impartiality. When we do that, we see that our sources of happiness aren't just our own achievements but also those to whom we're related. And that allows us a much greater scope for joy for happiness and concern. And that's reflected in mudita, or sympathetic joy. It enables us to recognize our interconnectedness with others and hence the fact that we're bound by friendship, or maitri. It causes us to react to others' distress with care and not with callousness, and that's karuna. And I think that those four aspects, valorized in the Buddhist tradition as what we might call cardinal virtues, work together primarily to ask us to reorient ourselves in the moral landscape.

James Shaheen: Thank you. That's so well put. I think there are some fundamental assumptions, I just want to get to another one of them, that we consider universal and true. For instance, we have this impression that one day we just discover ourselves as infants. We say, "Hey, I'm here," and then we notice that there are others. But you are citing studies that suggest that it's really we begin to become aware of ourselves only in relation to the other through awareness of and recognition by second persons. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Jay Garfield: Yeah, I think it's very powerful, and it's an idea that we can come at either philosophically or empirically. You're referring to the empirical work that I cite, and the real heroine of this is the English psychologist Vasudevi Reddy, who's done dramatic and pathbreaking work exploring the way that infants come to know that they themselves are persons or come to recognize themselves as beings. She's pointed out that infants do that by first recognizing the personhood and the sentience of someone else, typically our mother or a caregiver, and we come to recognize ourselves as persons by seeing that that person responds to us as persons. And so it's not that we first look inside and say, "Wow, I'm a self, I'm a sentient being, or I'm a person" and then wonder whether other people are. An infant can't wonder

whether its mother is a person. That has to be taken for granted. And that's the basis upon which we develop our entire concept of personhood and then come to see that it applies to us as well. What Vasudevi Reddy shows, and what other philosophers have shown before her through philosophical argument, but not nailed down so rigorously as she does, is that we can only come to understand ourselves as sentient, minded beings, by already having that concept to apply to ourselves, and the only way we can develop that concept is by seeing that sentience, that mindedness, that personality instantiated in others. So second persons are actually prior in that sense to first persons.

James Shaheen: It's so counterintuitive, it's sort of very surprising to hear, but it makes sense in the framework of no-self or non-self.

Jay Garfield: Absolutely. And you know, philosophers like K.C. Bhattacharya and Levinas have been emphasizing this for a while. Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations makes much the same point. But if it's an abstract, philosophical argument, people kind of shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, that's just what weird philosophers think." I'm really happy that Reddy really nails it down with beautiful, rigorous studies, showing how infants come to know themselves as second persons for another before they understand themselves as first persons. And I think it's really beautiful. It reminds us that part of our gratitude towards those around us is gratitude for our own identity, which is conferred by those around us and revealed to us by those around us.

James Shaheen: You know, a lot of people find this notion of no-self or non-self frightening, or it's occasioned by a sense of loss or groundlessness. And you write, "To regard ourselves as selfless persons is not to denigrate but to make sense of our reality and to recognize that our lives are only possible and can only have meaning in the context of a world." That's a far less lonely understanding to me than this self that I'm so attached to.

Jay Garfield: Yeah, I think that's right. One of the paradoxes of the self illusion is that we're kind of driven to it in order to give our lives meaning or substantiality, to make it something worth caring about. And the cruel irony is that nobody would care about a completely independent, inaccessible being outside of space and time that's unrelated to everybody else. I mean, we build something that's totally fictional but also not even desirable as that bulwark, and we neglect the fact that if we simply pay attention to who we are and that our being is, as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, interbeing, and that interbeing is a really beautiful way to be, we don't need that myth to give our lives meaning. And in fact, that myth invigorates our lives of meaning rather than enhances any meaning that we already have.

James Shaheen: You also discuss language later in the book. Can you share how language comes into play and how we understand ourselves as persons? Because language seems to be so much of what we simply are.

Jay Garfield: As persons, we've, of course, evolved to be language users. That's one of the things that's quite distinctive about members of Homo sapiens among all of the other sentient animals on earth. Language helps constitute us in important ways as persons. Here's how. Part of what it is to be a person is to have beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears, what philosophers call in our technical jargon propositional attitudes, that is, states of mind that can be characterized by having propositional content: I believe that snow is white, I hope that the war in Ukraine will be over soon, I fear that Chernobyl might melt down again. Each of these things is represented as a sentence. And to be a person is to be able to interpret myself as having attitudes characterized by these sentences and to be able to interpret other persons as having those kinds of attitudes. Now, when we think about how we do that, it's kind of interesting. I don't look inside and find an inscription in English or some other language in my brain and read it to myself and say, wow, I really do believe that snow is white because there's that snow is white sentence in my belief box.

And I don't look at another person and say, wow, she really does want to eat those oranges because I see a little I want oranges sentence in her desire box. We don't do that. Nonetheless, our self-understanding and our understanding of others is deeply implicated in our ability to ascribe states like this. If we don't understand each other and ourselves as believers, desirers, hopers, and fearers, then we don't think of ourselves as persons. But the only way that we do that is by first learning language and learning what meaning is in the context of language and then learning to interpret others' inner states as language-like, and so when we make ourselves available to either self-interpretation or interpretation by others and when we open ourselves to being willing to interpret others through the medium of language, then we come to respect each other as cognitive agents, as persons have to be. But it's language that gives us that model of meaningful vehicles of content that allow us to think of our inner states as other kinds of meaningful vehicles of content. It allows us to think of ourselves as participants in a community of meaning constituted in a community in which we are constantly interpreting one another using language. So I think that the conventions of language are absolutely at the heart of what it is to be a person.

James Shaheen: You say that the possibility of speech itself depends on intersubjectivity, like everything else, our very existence, does.

Jay Garfield: Absolutely. Because without intersubjectivity, we can't constitute the rules for using words that make the words meaningful. Language isn't something we discover. It's something we create. And it's not something that I create. It's something that we create because language is a rule-governed activity, just like thinking is a rule-governed activity, and rules require agreement, mechanisms of enforcement, people who will confirm that I followed the rule correctly or will correct me for having followed a rule incorrectly. Those are the rules that make our words meaningful. If the word "horse" couldn't be used to refer only to horses and not to cows and dogs, it wouldn't be a meaningful term. But that's only because we collectively agreed

to use it in that way and not in another way. And so interbeing and interrelatedness is essential for the constitution of language. Language is important for the constitution of our ability to understand ourselves and others as believers and thinkers and agents. And so interbeing becomes prior to the individual being of persons. That's a really important thing to recognize, the way that the relationship between a person and a society is not like this, that a bunch of preexisting persons wandered around in the forest or on the savannah and then met each other and said, "Hey, let's constitute a community." It doesn't work that way. Instead, communities arose in which persons could be constituted, and our identity is very much the identity of members of a community. I think that's extraordinarily important. So when Candrakirti, in his discussion of conventional reality, says that one of the aspects of conventional existence is that not only do wholes depend on their parts but parts depend upon their whole and that things depend for their identity on conceptual imputation, he has us in mind. We depend for identity as persons on the whole communities in which we participate. And the only way we can recognize ourselves and others as persons is to impute conceptual activity to them through language. Those are important parts of what conventional identity is. Once we recognize that, we see that conventional identity is not second-rate identity. It's all the identity you could ever want.

James Shaheen: You say, "Persons are poised between the biological, the psychological, and the social, and they live on the cusp of fact, and fiction." What does it mean to live on the cusp of fact and fiction? I thought that was really a captivating phrase.

Jay Garfield: Yeah, I make a lot in this book, as I do in my Hume book, of the weird fact that the words fact and fiction in English are cognate, and it's something that's easy to forget. Fact is obviously cognate with factory. It refers to things that we make, and fictions are things that we make up. They both, by the way, come from the Latin *fingere*, which is where finger comes from too, something that we do and that we make with our hands. So it's easy to forget that fictions can constitute reality. It's a fact that Hamlet is a fictional Danish prince. It's a fact that Ahab was

captain of the Pequod, and not Queequeg. He was a harpooner. Fictions constitute kinds of facts and truth. And when I think about fictions, what I think of is things that humans bring into existence. Among the things that humans bring into existence are human beings, are persons. We're brought into existence by the network of social and biological conventions in which we participate, by the narratives that we construct for ourselves and that are constructed by others around us. So we are fictions. We're as much fictions as Hamlet is in some respects. In other respects, not because we're part of a much broader and less optional fiction than the one that Hamlet participates in. But what I want to emphasize in that little remark is that fictions create facts, and fictions, of course, also rely on extra fictional facts in order to create them. Our bodies aren't necessarily created as fictions, and part of our existence is biological. But our personhood is very much an artifact. Hume pointed out that we're natural artificers. The best artifact that we've ever created is ourselves, persons. And for that reason, while we're factual, we're also fictional. We're biological organisms, but we only become persons in the context of our social existence. So the social, the biological, the factual, and the fictional, all come together in personhood.

James Shaheen: So you write that we are distinct, though, from literary persons because we are embodied, embedded and enactive in the world.

Jay Garfield: We are embodied. Hamlet doesn't have a body, not a real one, though he is instantiated by different bodies when people perform the play. We are not optional. We can either choose to read Shakespeare or not; we can't choose whether to live our lives or not. While Hamlet might be embedded in Shakespeare's narrative, and in the conventions and history of the theater, we are embedded in a much, much wider context. And so when we talk about the difference between fact and fiction, what makes us different from those kinds of fictions is the breadth and depth of our embedding and of our mandatory, biological instantiation and mandatory inaction of our lives. But that's all, as I say, enacted, embodied, and embedded. And

that's really what makes us go. That's not independent selves who happen to encounter one another.

James Shaheen: And how does this inform, then, how we can care about others and live a moral life?

Jay Garfield: Well, once you see that we are not solo improv stand-up players but rather members of a vast improv collective, you recognize that the only way that I can succeed is if we succeed. The only way I can be happy is if we're happy. And the only way my life can be meaningful is if our lives are meaningful. And I think the recognition that our identity is coconstituted, the recognition that the only kind of identity that we have is interdependent and not independent identity, allows us to respond to others with gratitude, with care, with friendship. And that's the moral attitude that I think we ought to be encouraging. I think that in general, each of us, no matter how egoistic we might start, we'll find out that we're happier when we shed the egoism and discover through mudita, or sympathetic joy, that the world is full of sources of happiness, and most of them aren't me.

James Shaheen: Yeah, to sum it up, you write, "to accept that you have no self is not to reject your identity, it is to reclaim your humanity."

Jay Garfield: That's how I see it.

James Shaheen: So Jay Garfield, it's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self*, out on May 17. You can pre-order now on Amazon and elsewhere. So thanks again, Jay.

Jay Garfield: Thank you very much. It's been a real joy talking with you, and I hope that people enjoy our conversation.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Jay Garfield. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!